

The last word

JUMP CUT's first twenty years: some politics of editing

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Anniversaries are often times for looking back, and after 20 years of producing JUMP CUT, we want to reflect on some of the lessons we've learned. Or to be more precise, we want to consider some things that informed the project from the start but which over time have become increasingly important and obvious to us: ideas embodied in the practice of editing.

Some of us who began JUMP CUT had extensive experience in the Underground Press, the publication of offset tabloid periodicals in the 60s and 70s that ranged from analytical to irreverent. That medium's thrifty format, eclecticism, and deliberately positioning itself outside the mainstream still inform our style. When we published the first issue of JUMP CUT in 1974, it was then hard to get the left to take culture and media issues seriously. When political activists did write about media, they dismissed Hollywood as simply racist, sexist, and anti-working class.

Or if reviews in the left press did admire a "bad" film, the reviewer might write, "This film admirably portrays the corruption of..." Such a critic might admit that a mass audience loved Hollywood but said this film carried a nefarious ideology that only the critic (and perhaps a few like-minded political sophisticates) could recognize and decipher. Such a critical stance didn't get very far in explaining film and television's mass appeal. In fact all you could really conclude from these reviews was that the masses of people were easily duped.

We get many such submissions to JUMP CUT, and over the years we've certainly published many such reviews. But, recognizing the limits of this approach, we've also sought out more sophisticated analyses that can account for the appeal of mass culture, and we tried writing our own: for example, Chuck Kleinhans on *EVEL KNIEVEL* and *THE LAST AMERICAN HERO* (JC 2); John Hess on *THE GODFATHER II* (JC 7), Julia Lesage on Griffith's *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* (JC 26).

The second context in which JUMP CUT was founded and in which it has

flourished is the rise of film and television studies as an academic discipline. In 1974 we saw this new academic discipline emerging and we wanted to shape its agenda. In that sense, we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. When we began, the dominant academic models for any kind of ideological criticism of Hollywood were heavily indebted to tracing stereotypes and using mass communications research content-analysis models. Furthermore, the Frankfurt School's influential, sophisticated, denunciatory analysis seemed to deny any valid pleasure in or progressive role for mass culture. Having grown up with radio, records, movies, TV, and rock n roll, we found it was hard to dance to nothing but Schoenberg. We were children of Marx and Coca Cola, as Godard once put it, survivors of the New Left and the 60s counter-culture. We eagerly threw ourselves into building the cultural dimensions of political struggle and the political dimensions of cultural struggle, and we have both drawn our strength from and hopefully contributed to the revived feminist movement, the gay and lesbian movements, the civil rights movement, and antiwar and anti-imperialist movements in these decades.

We have always assumed that genuinely radical critiques of the existing state of things — in this case, media culture — usually come from disempowered groups, from the margins, from those people trying to change the way things are. Our location within activism enhances our intellectual acuity. The enhanced perception of what is wrong with the status quo, generated from the margins, always involves two different but interconnected activities. One always involves a critique of the dominant, the well established, be that the unique high-culture art-world work or commercial culture's formulaic productions. The other activity involves building alternative institutions and constructing alternative practices, creating something new from the deconstruction of the dominant. We realize that a politicized cultural activism means working in both these areas, but we know that these two approaches are frequently insufficient in themselves. That is, critique alone is not enough, for it may well be framed within limits. Many activists or left and feminist intellectuals will raise legitimate questions about the popular and the commercial. But they also shield their own desire for another set of bourgeois norms, those embedded in the European art film, a form which escapes criticism for its handling of class, race and gender. Or a radical writer may develop one particular aspect of his/her analysis but not others: for example, addressing gender but not class, or race but not gender. Too often such analysis develops out of a critic's own position which s/he leaves unexamined.

Often U.S. activists try to totally reject the dominant without recognizing the way that a radical departure from bourgeois norms may involve dissent but does not automatically lead to a politically effective practice. In lifestyle this has sometimes produced a celebration of downward mobility, in media work a rejection of possible allies who work within established institutions, and in aesthetics an embracing of radical form for its own sake.

To actually reconsider one's own position critically is not that easy. To see beyond the comfortable horizon of the present moment and present social place in thinking about culture takes an effort. But sometimes we've found writings that gave us a new insight, such as Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of our Mothers'

Gardens" (in her book of that title), which considers the perishable yet annually renewed art form of African American women's gardens as a way of getting us to think about art and culture where it might be overlooked. Or we've found a model in Lucy Lippard's essay on women's hobby arts and crafts and in "The Pink Glass Swan" (collected in her *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*), which sympathetically considers working class women's taste and activities in art and interior decoration.

We've also been challenged and inspired by looking beyond European and North American culture and learning about Latin American, African, and Asian cinema. Our study trips to Cuba and Nicaragua and our interactions with media workers there have been an important part of this learning process. In editing special sections on Cuban cinema, Brazilian cinema, Third World film, African and African diaspora cinema, we've been enriched with new viewing experiences and challenged to rethink some basic ideas about what film and video is and can do.

This returns us to the need for a practical politics, one based on the ability to intervene in situations, to address actual individual and social needs. In this perspective, one of the most encouraging things that has happened in the past twenty years is that, gradually and irregularly, an infrastructure for alternatives has been put in place. It's as if the children of the 60s counterculture managed to grow up, and a significant number have kept their utopian vision of alternative practices while creating the longterm basis for continuing challenge to the status quo. The success in many areas of local cable programming has provided more room for alternative views on television, though there has been a very limited success of initiatives to gain more space for dissent on public broadcasting. But the creation and growth of institutions such as Paper Tiger television and Deep Dish television have created more opportunities for more voices to be heard. And, in a limited way, but still significantly, the need for product in an expanding cable and dish market has left room for some progressive programming such as John Alpert's exposé documentaries on HBO. Similarly, the development of media art centers has helped decentralize media production and maintain a presence for exhibition. Specifically, JUMP CUT's own history has been shaped by the fact that the majority of our editorial board, in addition to writing about film and television, either independently make film and video or have built and sustained alternative venues for media exhibition and distribution.

In a similar vein, the ongoing success of constituency-oriented film and video festivals has provided an encouraging context for our work. For example, 1974, the year we started JUMP CUT, saw Chicago's first women's film festival. Today the city has an ongoing successful Women in the Director's Chair festival and events through the year, a major Latino festival, Blacklight — an African and African American festival, a long standing Gay and Lesbian festival, and shorter themed programs for Asian American, Native American, senior citizen, and international children's festivals. Other institutions, such as the School of the Art Institute's Film Center, Chicago Filmmakers (just getting started when JUMP CUT began), the Video Data Bank, and Facets Multimedia, have provided the infrastructure of diffusion — film/video exhibition and the distribution of tapes — that is essential

for sustaining media making.

Similar developments can be noted in other places, and college campuses have become significant sites for alternative exhibitions and productions. The areas of criticism, scholarship, and teaching have also changed over time. Film studies with a radical bent have developed into critical television studies and formed much of the basis for the field of cultural studies. While professional academic associations are typically bedrocks of conservatism, the Society for Cinema Studies has for some years now highlighted feminist and multicultural analyses. And academic conferences such as Console-ing Passions (on TV and video), and Visible Evidence (on documentary) have significant panels on queer media, new African American and Latino video, and grassroots media activism.

While we have to acknowledge the casualties in the "culture wars" of the Reagan-Bush years, on balance we have also witnessed a notable, broad-based resistance to art censorship and a narrowly construed version of intellectual inquiry. Certainly the tide in this round of the culture wars, that of a "political correctness" debate, has turned, and many conservative figures such as William Bennett seem to be just flapping their wings rather than soaring with the eagles. In the long view, the reactionary challenge from the religious and secular right is growing more formidable. Yet in the last several decades, progressive activists have created media and political organizations to meet this challenge head on. As "radical" becomes a word appended to the radical right and as that sector of society perceives itself as an oppressed minority with its vision for social change, we are compelled to find ways to re-present and recast our own radical vision and that of the movements which informed us when we began JUMP CUT as a project.

Although many of us on the editorial board are independent media producers, JUMP CUT has had an awkward relation to independent producers while trying to support this sector of the media world. In forming JUMP CUT we saw the need to maintain a critical stance to both the dominant system of media production and to the actual alternatives. That has caused a pragmatic difficulty. If you want alternatives to succeed, you want to bring them forward, promote them to some extent, and give them the spotlight of attention. At the same time, independent producers, starved for publicity, recognition, and critical praise, look to radical writers on media for support. But we have been committed to the principle that uncritical support, in the long run, undermines the goal of building not just individual careers but institutional developments within a broad activist movement that can support and sustain individuals. While the Alternative Cinema Conference in 1979 (JC 21, 22) never lived up to its organizers' and participants' highest hopes, in retrospect the proliferation of identity politics caucuses within the conference in many ways turned out to be a forecast of the need for coalition politics in the 1980s. What was then seen by some as a destructive fragmentation turned out to be the emergence of "separate-interest" causes which actually represent vital directions in alternative media today.

Sometimes "mainstreaming works," that is moving from the margins to the center not by challenging the existing power but by being absorbed or assimilated into the

dominant. Sometimes the door is ajar and some people can move in, catching a trend. But it doesn't work for everybody (certainly not for everyone who'd like to mainstream) and the mainstream can't absorb all the dissent without overflowing its banks. Alternative institutions provide the space for something different, something better, something oppositional, something aimed at trying to transform, revolutionize, the existing order. It seems a particularly American trait to create alternative spaces, to seek independence and a chance to do-it-yourself and live the utopian desire. In its own small way JUMP CUT is an expression of that. For its editors it has provided access into intellectual life when unemployed or under-employed in academic pursuits. It has been a form of radical political work that could be sustained over time. And it has kept us alert and tuned in to new developments, new possibilities, new films and tapes, and through our writers and readers new people with new ideas. Over these twenty years we have been challenged by our writers and readers to rethink and develop our own views of film, video, the media, our culture, and the world we live in. We look forward to continuing this exciting process of growth and change with you.

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